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ABSTRACT

A survey involving 98 speech communication majors enrolled in a leadership communication course at a large midwestern university was conducted to determine what students in the field of communication think regarding leadership. Respondents were asked for their opinions regarding the ideal traits of leaders, how leadership has changed in the last 100 years, professions and individuals who set positive and negative examples of leadership in today's society, and advice they would offer to future leaders. Results revealed that leaders need to possess strong personal ethics and should view their leadership roles as service to others rather than an opportunity to fulfill self-interests. Results also revealed that political leaders, television evangelists, and professional sports figures were examples of leaders held in low esteem while educators, coaches, and religious leaders provided examples of positive leadership. Further study into students' views on leadership is called for. (KEH)

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A STUDENT PERSPECTIVE ON LEADERS AND LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

A survey involving 98 speech communication majors enrolled in a leadership communication course at a large midwestern university was conducted over a two-semester time-period. Respondents were asked for their opinions regarding the ideal traits of leaders, how leadership has changed in the last 100 years, professions and individuals who set positive and negative examples of leadership in today's society, and advice they would offer to future leaders. The survey included 11 open-ended questions. This paper reviews responses to seven of the 11 questions on the survey. The remaining four questions were used within the context of the course and were not a part of the data for this paper.

Introduction

In a recent article in "Management Review", James Kouzes and Barry Posner have suggested that "leadership is a reciprocal process that occurs between people" (1990, p.32). Their survey of 7,500 managers nationwide over the past six years indicates lucidly what qualities followers (in this case managers), admire most in those who lead them. Their results indicated that followers are interested in leaders who are honest, competent, forward-looking, inspiring, and intelligent (top five responses).

Peter Drucker (1988), considered by many to be a pioneer in the field of management, has suggested that good leaders must be able to earn trust, see leadership as a responsibility rather than a rank or privilege, and be able to understand and pass along that particular organization's mission.

Warren Bennis (1989), author of two books on leadership and former president at the University of Cincinnati, traveled the country to spend time with 90 of the nation's most successful leaders. His interviews with 60 heads of corporate America and 30 leaders from the public sector, suggest that these individuals hold four common characteristics leading to effective leadership. Bennis identified the four as: management of attention (the ability to draw others to a vision or idea), management of meaning (the ability to align people and communicate the vision), management of trust (reliability or constancy), and management of self (to know your own skills, strengths and weaknesses). Jimmy Calano and Jeff Salzman (1989), president and vice president of Career Track, a business seminar company, have suggested among other things, that a good leader must have vision, exude energy, help others to achieve their goals, and be decisive yet flexible.

It would seem that there is a plethora of approaches and opinions regarding what comprises good leaders and leadership. And while many of these voices offer perspectives with years of experience and practical wisdom, one voice that appears to be missing is that of future leaders. The purpose of this project was to find out what university juniors and seniors, majoring in communication and enrolled in a leadership course, would say if asked to voice their opinions of leaders and leadership. While this survey is modest in scope, it is intended to provide some beginning insight into what students in our field think regarding leadership.

Method

An 11-item survey concerning leaders and leadership was constructed and administered to 98 speech communication majors enrolled in an upper level leadership communication course at a large midwestern university. The survey was conducted during the first week of classes in the Fall and Spring semesters of the 1989-1990 academic year. Respondents included 34 males and 64 females who ranged from 20 to 24 in age (20=9, 21=48, 22=28, 23=12, 24=1). Questions on the survey, with the exception of two items regarding sex and age, were open-ended in order to encourage a more complete response from the subjects.

Results

Item one on the survey stated: "If asked to list, in your own opinion, the three qualities that you would consider to be the most important for a leader to possess, what qualities would they be?". Results from this question were categorized and words similar in meaning were combined under larger headings. While there were numerous qualities listed by respondents, the top 12 answers for item one on the survey are listed below:

<u>Quality named</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Ranking</u>
Honest/Trustworthy	27	1
Ability to communicate well	25	2*
Knowledgeable/Intelligent	25	2*
Charismatic	23	4
High Self-Esteem/confidence	20	5
Open-minded	17	6
Ethical/fair	14	7
Ability to get along w/others	13	8*
Good listening skills	13	8*
Ability to motivate/be motivated	11	10
Organizational skills	8	11
Goal oriented	7	12

* indicates an equal number of responses and a tie in the ratings.

The second question on the survey read, "What one leadership quality do you feel is missing among today's leaders? Do you think this quality was more evident in leaders one-hundred years ago?". While answers varied greatly to this question, there were three themes that emerged from many of the responses.

The first, and perhaps strongest theme, involved students' perceptions that leaders today lack ethical and moral integrity. Many students cited specific examples of moral and ethical failure in contemporary leaders. One student said, "I think the ethical values in the world today have gone downhill considerably. One-hundred years ago people had stronger morals and a true sense of right and wrong." Another responded, "I believe that most leaders are lacking a strong sense of what is ethical. It seems as though everyday you're hearing about a top official being indicted on various charges." Still another respondent said, "Again, honesty is the issue. How many times have we caught leaders in today's society lying and cheating?". While many respondents voiced concern regarding ethics in today's leaders, most were unwilling to say that conditions were better one-hundred years ago.

A second issue that surfaced repeatedly was a general feeling that today's leaders have become less interested in serving others, and more interested in serving self-interests. A 22-year-old male said that he felt elected officials didn't always look out for the best interests of their constituents. A 21-year-old female responded, "Sometimes I don't feel they (leaders) always care about the little guys and the effect their decisions may have on everyone." Another student responded, "I think a lot of leaders have forgotten that the people they are leading should come first. Most leaders are interested in using a leadership position for personal gain." These observations are quite consistent with Drucker's earlier opinion that leadership should be viewed as a responsibility rather than a rank or privilege.

A third, and perhaps lesser theme evident in responses to question two, involved the notion that leaders seemed to be more concerned with image and media than they were with making good decisions and providing strong leadership. "Most leaders in the public eye go with the majority ... the public opinion," offered one respondent. Another suggested, "political leaders are quick to condemn the actions of others and pass judgment on them, but they want nothing more than to wipe their hands of their own wrong doing." Still another respondent suggested, "leaders today cater to public opinion, even if it's unethical. Some of our greatest leaders went against public opinion. Consider Abraham Lincoln's stand on slavery."

The third item on the survey asked, "If you could offer one piece of personal advice to tomorrow's leaders, what would it be?". What follows is a sample of the advice students offered:

- * "Be genuinely concerned for the people you lead. Learn to be empathetic, but determined to succeed."
- * "Make goals that are attainable."
- * "Remember that there are consequences to all actions ... what goes around comes around."
- * "Be someone who is open to change and new ideas."
- * "Being a leader shouldn't be an ego trip, it should be an experience spent humbly serving others."
- * "Avoid surrounding yourself with 'yes men' and work with more critical contributors."
- * "In all situations, serve the people before you serve your own self-interests."
- * "Be confident in yourself and keep your values. Don't mold your leadership abilities to fit society's lack of values. Be committed to your own [values]."
- * "Listen to the people under you. They have a lot of great ideas that nobody will listen to."

Items four and five of the survey pertained to professions which students felt served as positive and negative examples of leadership. The question was phrased as follows: "What profession do you hold in highest/lowest regard concerning the provision of good role models of leadership?". Students responded that political leaders, television evangelists, and professional sports figures were examples of leaders held in low esteem. They also found that educators, coaches, and religious leaders provided positive examples of leadership.

Political leaders received almost three times as many negative responses as any other occupation. Primarily, comments centered around the Iran-Contra affair, back-stabbing of rival candidates, and mismanagement and corruption in political office. Television evangelists were viewed negatively based on the recent events involving Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart. Many pointed to violations of trust and misappropriation of donations. Negative views of professional athletes focused on recent publicity involving drug use and illegal gambling.

With regard to positive leadership, educators were named overwhelmingly as the most popular role model by profession. One respondent shared, "I have had several influential teachers and professors. I think education has the potential to provide the public with great leaders." Another student said, "Grade school is an important time in kids' lives and grade school teachers exercise patience, fairness and strength. They set an example." Respondents indicated a second positive role model -- coaches. "They are not only able to teach a skill, but they gain respect and teach children how to listen, respect others, and [practice] discipline," said one respondent. A third positively perceived profession was religious leaders. A number of comments suggested that clergy have good motives and morals and that as a whole they are good listeners who show patience and honesty.

The final two questions on the survey dealt with naming specific leaders who provide favorable and unfavorable examples of leadership. The question was phrased as follows: "Name at least one public figure that you think is an excellent/poor role model of a good leader." Following are the listings of the top five individuals named in both the excellent and poor categories. Also included are composite quotes by some of the respondents...

Excellent Models of Leadership:

1. Martin Luther King - "One of the greatest leaders of all time... (he was) willing to die for his convictions... he wasn't afraid to voice his opinions and lead the black population to freedom."
2. Lee Iacocca - "Good business leader... turned Chrysler around."
3. George Bush - "He seems so natural, not like he is above us... seems to have a lot of respect... warm personality... his stand on abortion."

4. Mother Teresa - No specific written responses.

5. Pope John Paul II - "He's charismatic... has an excellent sense of justice... strong willed and not afraid to stand up for what is right... has a sincere love and respect for the people."

Poor Models Of Leadership:

1. Dan Quayle - "Doesn't seem to know what he's talking about... shows no initiative or confidence... doesn't think before he speaks... "

2. Manuel Noriega - "He's unjust, selfish and not very charismatic... he headed a corrupt government and preached violence."

3. Jim Bakker - "So many people believed that he was trying to do God's work and he blatantly deceived them."

4. Ronald Reagan - "Iran-Contra scandal... wears a mask... all he did was read off a cue card, he never thought for himself."

5. Pete Rose - "Millions looked up to him because of his baseball accomplishments and he acted in a way that showed that it meant nothing to him."

Among the other leaders named as positive role models were: Margaret Thatcher, Oprah Winfrey, John F. Kennedy, Barbara Walters, Tom Landry, Bishop Desmond Tutu, Bill Bright (founder of Campus Crusade For Christ), and George Voinovich (Mayor of Cleveland). On the negative side, other leaders that were named included: Fidel Castro, Jimmy Carter, Jim MacMahon (former Chicago Bear's quarterback), Adolph Hitler, Ted Kennedy, Henry Ford Jr., and Donna Owens (former Mayor of Toledo).

Discussion

In discussing the findings of this survey, it should be noted that in no way should the results of this study be applied to a larger population. Because of the specific nature of the responding group; that of university Communication majors, further study is necessary before any generalized statements can be made with regard to leaders and leadership. Perhaps the value of this research could be viewed instead as a beginning attempt to understand, in part, the perceptions of college students toward leadership.

There are a few observations that can be made from the results of the survey. The first would involve the predominance of responses related to the need for leaders to possess strong personal ethics. While ethics have always been a matter of intellectual pursuit in the arena of higher education, responses addressed to this issue of ethics were prevalent. One possible explanation for this emphasis on high ethical standards as a desirable quality for leaders could involve the fact that most college students have been exposed to a number of ethical scandals while growing up. Watergate (1972-73), Vice-President Agnew's resigning based on tax evasion charges (1973), impeachment hearings and the resignation of President Nixon (1974), the Soviet Union's shooting down of a commercial South Korean airliner (1983), the slaying of Indira Ghandi by two of her own bodyguards (1984), E.F. Hutton pleading guilty to 2000 federal charges related to the manipulation of checking accounts (1985), the Challenger disaster and subsequent investigation (1986), the Iran-Contra affair (1987), Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart's falling from grace (1987, 88), and Joseph Biden and Gary Hart dropping out of the presidential race due to ethical improprieties (1988), are just a few of the events that have occurred in recent years.

It might be suggested that these events, and others like them, have provided a living historical framework for discussions of moral and ethical issues for today's college students. In addition, others might assert that higher education is paying more attention to the teaching and promulgation of ethics through textbooks and coursework designed to focus on ethical subject matter. While no conclusion can or should be drawn at this point, it is important to acknowledge a keen interest on the part of the students who responded to this survey with regard to ethics in leadership.

A second observation, emerging from the survey, centers around a number of comments pointing to the need for leaders to view leadership as service to others rather than an opportunity to fulfill self-interests. This is an interesting response in view of the

perception by much of the media that people of the 80's are best categorized as the "me" generation. It would seem that at least some respondents are considering the necessity for leaders to view themselves as givers rather than takers with regard to being in positions of authority.

Another point of interest with regard to the survey involved students respect for educators. Despite public debate involving teacher competency and educational reform, respondents to this survey hold strong regard for people in the field of education. Again, while no firm conclusions can be drawn for the survey responses, it would seem that students in this survey do consider teachers/educators as positive examples of leaders.

Another observation regarding professions that enhance or denigrate good leadership involves the apparent distinction that respondents made between television evangelists and religious leaders. While one group was viewed with extreme distaste (TV evangelists), the other (religious leaders) was viewed with strong respect. It would appear that recent media attention regarding the downfall of two well-known television evangelists has helped to separate one group from the other. Further study to determine how these attitudes might differ using well-respected television ministers (for example Billy Graham) might prove quite interesting.

One final note of interest would involve the crossover of a number of names that appeared on both the positive and negative lists for leaders. Ronald Reagan, George Bush, and Jesse Jackson were present in some capacity on both the positive and negative lists (although Reagan appeared more frequently on the negative). It would be interesting to determine whether or not the perceptions made by respondents were based on political affiliation, and if so, to what degree.

Conclusion

This study has examined just a few of the perceptions held by a particular group of university students with regard to leaders and leadership. While this effort has been modest in scope, it is hoped that some of the ideas explored here can be developed into a fuller understanding of leadership. Further study into students' views on leaders and leadership may lead to a better understanding of what tomorrow's leaders believe about their own roles in society. As well, it may provide a look into what future leaders will expect of themselves and others with regard to the responsibilities and aspirations that accompany leadership.

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